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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRAGUE 000788

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/27/2017
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SUBJECT: TEHRAN SPRING? CZECHS SEE POSSIBLE THAW IN
RELATIONS WITH IRAN

REF: PRAGUE 701

Classified By: Acting DCM Michael Dodman
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. In a June 18-19 visit to Tehran, Czech Deputy Foreign Minister Helena Bambasova had surprisingly friendly meetings with key Iranian government officials to explore the possibility of improving relations between the estranged countries. While the focus of the trip was squarely on normalizing diplomatic relations, Bambasova also reiterated Czech support for human rights and Iranian compliance with UNSCR and IAEA decisions regarding their nuclear program. Bambasova said that the Iranian government has not yet decided on upgrading relations, but she expects forward movement. She emphasized, however, that such a change would not come at the expense of the Czech Republic's commitment to human rights and democracy in Iran, or its support of RFE/RL and Radio Farda. End summary.

Background of the Meeting

¶2. (C) The Czech Republic and Iran have not had full diplomatic relations since 1988. At that time, largely in retaliation for the launch of the Farsi-language Radio Farda broadcast from the Prague headquarters of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Iranian regime pulled its Ambassador from Prague and imposed a selective trade boycott that has severely disrupted economic ties between the two countries. The Czechs have also been represented only at the Charge level in Tehran. As Bambasova told A/DCM and Poloff on June 27, most discussions between the two countries over the past decade have been marked by Iranian complaints about Radio Farda, and Czech restatements of their commitment to RFE/RL's mission. Bambasova saw the first sign of change with the arrival last year of a new Iranian CDA in Prague. He arranged for the visit to Prague in February of a Iranian MFA's Director General, which set the stage for Bambasova's June 18-19 visit to Tehran.

¶3. (C) Bambasova described the purpose of her visit as an exploration of whether improved relations with the Iranian government are even possible. She met with her counterpart Deputy Foreign Minister Saeed Jalili (whom she described as a hardliner in his meetings), the Chairman of the Foreign Policy and National Security Committee of the Iranian Parliament Alaeddin Boroujerdi, and briefly with Foreign Minister Manoucher Mottaki (both of whom she described as moderate in their approach). Bambasova also participated in a meeting of EU Heads of Missions. This was Bambasova's first visit to Iran.

¶4. (C) Regarding the visit, Bambasova explained that the Czech Republic fully supports the EU common position on Iran

(a point she made clear to the Iranians), and is not willing to sacrifice its commitment to human rights and democracy in Iran (including its commitment to Radio Farda broadcasts), or its position on Iran's nuclear program, at any cost. Moreover, despite the selective embargo on Czech exports, the government is not under pressure from Czech business interests to improve relations with Iran (Bambasova said that Czech exports are able to work through Slovakia or the UAE to get products to Iran). Nevertheless, she said the Czech Republic is willing to explore the possibility of improved relations with Iran because it believes in dialogue whenever possible, even with Iran. When asked, Bambasova said the GOCR had no specific plans in mind for initiatives that they would take if and when relations are upgraded, but rather that they would continue their focus on supporting human rights and EU/UN/IAEA positions.

Bilateral issues

15. (C) Bambasova presented Minister Mottaki with a letter from FM Schwarzenberg formally proposing to reestablish full diplomatic relations between the two countries (the Iranians have not yet given a formal reply). Her meeting with the Minister was brief but positive. She had a longer meeting with Deputy Minister Jalili, whom she described as the only one of her interlocutors who adhered to the "Ahmadinejad line." Still, the meeting with Jalili was productive and he showed a clear willingness to upgrade relations. Bambasova's readout of the visit focused primarily on her meeting with Boroujerdi. They discussed an upgrade in diplomatic representation, and discussed in general terms the possibility of renewed economic trade. In addition, Boroujerdi lectured Bambasova on the virtues of Iranian "democracy" and provided a laundry list of Czech "sins."

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These included Radio Farda and the fact that the son of the former Shah had recently attended a conference on democracy that took place on the premises of the Czech MFA. However, Bambasova found the list of "sins" to be "very mild" and took this as a sign of moderation; there was not, for instance, any demand that the Czechs restrict Radio Farda broadcasts in return for upgrading relations. In response to Boroujerdi's comments, Bambasova explained the Czech vision of democracy, including the importance of permitting NGOs (like those who convened the democracy conference) to act independently.

Iranian Nuclear Program

16. (C) In reporting on her meeting with Boroujerdi, the Iranian news agency quoted Bambasova as saying that Iran has a right to a civil nuclear program. Bambasova told us that she did tell Boroujerdi that all countries have a right to peaceful nuclear energy, pointing out that the Czech Republic has its own nuclear power program. However, her statement was taken out of context. She also firmly told the Iranians that the international community has sent a strong message via the UNSC that Iran cannot ignore. She called on Iran to take immediate steps to build the confidence of the international community that the program is only a civil energy program. She pointed to the German and Russian proposals as ways the Iran government could reassure the international community.

Missile Defense

17. (C) Bambasova said that Missile Defense was raised in only one meeting, and that the exchange was not confrontational. (Bambasova made clear during her meetings that the Czech Republic is a strong ally of the United States.) She suspected that while the Iranians are not happy about the proposal to base a radar in the Czech Republic, they are far more concerned with the Russian offer to use the radar in Azerbaijan as an early warning for possible Iranian launches.

Human Rights

18. (C) Bambasova spoke of human rights in general terms, and reiterated the priority the Czechs place on this issue, but did not raise the issue of American citizens detained in Iran (this was the subject of an EU-wide demarche delivered during her visit).

U.S. Relations

19. (C) Bambasova said the question of U.S.-Iranian relations was not raised directly in her meetings. Bambasova found this noteworthy, because she had expected that, given close Czech-U.S. relations, she would have heard complaints from the Iranians about "U.S. sins." Based on the few references made to the United States during her meetings, Bambasova offered the assessment that the Iranians feel "like a small child who is ignored by an older brother."

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